Bad cinema' is widely defined in terms of its opposition to both art and mainstream cinema, making it 'Hollywood's 'bad other'. Underlying this conceptualisation are the binaries of a Hollywood centric approach to Film Studies: the globally dominant cinema sets the standard by which all other cinemas are judged - and often found lacking. Paradoxically, cinemas seen to oppose Hollywood are also valorised at the expense of the globally dominant cinema which is denigrated. Thus good is bad and bad is good. Hollywood, however, is bad in more ways than one. Not only is it accused of 'ruining all the cinemas in Europe'(Godard: 1989-1998), it is the significant bad Other, from which all other cinemas need to be protected. (Elsaesser: 2005)In this scenario, cinemas are imagined to possess rigid and impermeable borders. These supposedly keep Hollywood conservative and immune from the ideas, images and sounds of Bad cinema. Similarly, the borders often erected around Bad cinema are thought to keep Hollywood out and protect its essential 'otherness'. This paper challenges the common perception of Hollywood's relationship to its 'bad other'. It addresses issues of cultural value and aesthetics to propose replacing the notion of fixed cinematic borders with that of a chaotic, fluid screenscape in which global cultural flows carry 'badness' between cinemas within the transnational imaginary. It asks if films commonly perceived to abhor the excess, low production values and sleaze of bad cinema, are also widely imagined to be bad itself, just how bad is bad, what value can we place on badness, and do two bads make a good?


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This paper challenges the common perception of Hollywood’s relationship to its ‘bad other’. It addresses issues of cultural value and aesthetics to propose replacing the notion of fixed cinematic borders with that of a chaotic, fluid screenscape in which global cultural flows carry ‘badness’ between cinemas within the transnational imaginary. It asks if films commonly perceived to abhor the excess, low production values and sleaze of bad cinema, are also widely imagined to be bad itself, just how bad is bad, what value can we place on badness, and do two bads make a good?

HOLLYWOOD AND ITS ‘BAD OTHER’.

I realise now that I should have titled this paper “Hollywood: Bad Cinema’s Bad ‘Other’.

But I confess I played so long and hard with the good/bad binary oppositions, overlaps, contradictions, negations and affirmations – and had so much fun with them that I was in danger of disappearing in a vortex of taste cultures and polarisations.

After a while I simply couldn’t always work out which cinema I was actually talking about.

This is, in fact, my argument – not that difference disappears, but to focus upon difference within a framework of binary oppositions means we ignore, or fail to notice, diversity and heterogeneity.

First, I’d like to show a clip from a film which engages in mutual, multi-layered and multi-directional flows of ideas, images, sounds and other cultural phenomena that demolishes the binary oppositions between Hollywood and non-Hollywood and between good and bad taste values.

⇒ Serial Mom (John Waters, 1994)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMKgUJn0feM&feature=related
I’ll return to this film later when I’ve outlined by argument in a more detail.

**First:** “**Bad Cinema**’ is widely defined in terms of its opposition to mainstream cinema.

In ‘Trashing the Academy’ Jeffrey Sconce notes that, paracinematic fans… explicitly situate themselves in opposition to Hollywood cinema…”¹

That ‘Bad cinema’ is widely defined in terms of its opposition to the globally dominant commercial mainstream cinema is not unusual.

Since about 1918 when Hollywood became established as the globally dominant cinema, *all* cinemas have tended to be categorised as either ‘Hollywood’ or ‘non-Hollywood.’

A widespread conceptualisation of a screenscape endorses the polar opposition of Hollywood and its ‘others’: the avant garde, German expressionist, indigenous or First nation, French New Wave, feminist and queer cinemas, to name but a few, are all proudly non-Hollywood.

And, as Sconce also noted, this process of defining and locating a cinema in relationship to Hollywood has often been one of ‘**self-othering**’. Again, Paracinema is not alone in this. It’s a process that’s been adopted and promoted by most, perhaps all, non-Hollywood cinemas and their filmmakers, critics, academics, fans and general audiences.

National cinemas, for example, often – though not always, wear their nationality in their name badge as a matter of pride. They do so not only to distinguish themselves from other nationals cinemas but also to distinguish themselves from Hollywood since Hollywood’s status is largely that of a cinema which transcends all national borders.²

This distinction-making naming process hasn’t been only one of self-definition. If non-Hollywood cinemas have been (and are) anxious to distinguish themselves from the hegemonically powerful commercial mainstream cinema, Hollywood has also worked hard to construct and perpetuate the distinction between it and its Others.
When classical Hollywood cinema was becoming, or had only recently become, established in the 1930s, sleaze, explicit sex and anything that might be considered ‘untoward’ or ‘improper’ was outlawed. ³

It wasn’t, of course, completely outlawed: as the producers in Sullivan’s Travels (Preston Sturges, 1941) reveal, the studios did encourage “a little bit of sex.”

But the studios did not wish to fuel the perfervid imaginations of censors and those who sought to control the appetites and desires of the working class and new immigrants which, in the early days of cinema, largely constituted cinema’s audiences.

The Hollywood studios – and, it should be said, mainstream commercial cinemas around the world, felt the need to turn their backs on the masses and aspire to art in order to appeal to more solidly bourgeois audiences. It is this dilemma – basically the ‘commerce versus art’ polarisation which is another version of the ‘high culture versus low culture’ binary - that makes the opening scene of Sullivan’s Travels so funny.

Paradoxically we see something similar going on in the academy as Sconce points out:

> Throughout a history of cinema studies as a discipline, the cultivation of various counter-cinemas, exclusive cinematic canons that do not easily admit to textual pleasures of more ‘commonplace’ audiences, has been a crucial strategy in maintaining as sense of cultural distinction for film scholars.⁴

It is a distinction that Hollywood and mainstream cinemas also promote. While disparaged by its ‘others’ for lacking what they possessed or aspired to, ‘Hollywood’ cinema undoubtedly possesses and delivers what millions of people around the world want. This predictability is a cultural distinction that had been carefully nurtured.

Since the hey day of classic Hollywood cinema, those well-known studio logos - MGM’s roaring lion, 20⁰ Century Fox’s floodlit deco skyline, Paramount’s mountain peak, RKO’s pulsing transmitter, Universal’s globe, and Columbia’s torch lady – have acted as seals on the guarantee of a predictable sort of pleasure.
For Peter Wollen’s, Hollywood’s ability to deliver pleasure is a cardinal sin in polar opposition to counter-cinema’s cardinal virtue of ‘unpleasure’.

The screenscape, it seems, is crowded with binaries.

This, in my opinion, is not a healthy state for film makers, critics, scholars or audiences.

For underlying these binaries is a Hollywoodcentric model which explicitly marginalises non-Hollywood cinemas. Janes Gaines suggests this is actually two paradigms – a cinematic and a critical paradigm of classical Hollywood cinema. 5

The cinematic paradigm is one in which Hollywood is ‘good’ in the sense that it obeys the rules, or conforms to its codes and conventions. It is ‘the protagonist-driven story film, valued for the way it achieves closure by neatly resolving all the enigmas it raises as well as the way it creates this perfect symmetry by means of ingenious aesthetic economics’. This is clearly all that paracinema aspires to be.

This paradigm is supported by the critical paradigm in which taste cultures of good and bad play a large part. As a critical tool it focuses on aesthetics and engages in the analysis of the formal stylistic properties of film. It’s a critical paradigm that seeks out and finds the classical Hollywood cinematic paradigm and ignores much else.

The combination of the two paradigms presents a view that has filtered into the public domain and largely coincides with Hollywood’s own view of itself.

It also largely coincides with how paracinema views Hollywood.

For if Hollywood is all that paracinema aspires not to be, then this places Hollywood at the centre of paracinema’s self-definition. It makes Hollywood the benchmark by which its others are judged.

In this scenario, Hollywoodcentricity reigns and its Others are marginalised. This perception is firmly underpinned by cultures of taste in which ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are set in polar opposition to one another.
It leads to the intellectually suspect position in which a cinema that opposes Hollywood, a counter-cinema if you like, is automatically valorised in a reflex action at the expense of the globally dominant cinema which is denigrated simply for not being its ‘Other’.

Thus Hollywood is bad because it is good at what it does.

This brings me to the next part of my argument which relates to the notion of Hollywood being doubly bad.

Hollywood is located at the centre of the paradigm in part because it possesses what many audiences find lacking in its ‘Others’.

But, from the position of the periphery to where paracinema is both consigned and consigns itself, not only does Hollywood lack what its ‘others’ possess (in this instance by being too ‘good’ it lacks ‘badness’), it is also widely perceived to behave as a huge cannibalistic spider at the centre of a global web. From here it assimilates its ‘others’ or pushes them ever further towards the outer edges.

[We need the word ‘cinephagy’ in our vocabulary to describe such behaviour. Since we currently lack this word – although not the concept – I’d like to nominate ‘sparagmos’. The concept of tearing off and consuming flesh from a living body seems entirely appropriate at this particular conference.]

This is surely the well known – and I believe tired – conceptualisation of Hollywood as cultural imperialist.

It’s what Jean-Luc Godard was apparently referring to when in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* he accused the USA of ‘ruining ‘all the cinemas of Europe’. 6

And, as Thomas Elsaesser points out, this perception of a virulent opposition between non-Hollywood and Hollywood is indicative of the many

‘binary oppositions that usually constitute the field of academic Film Studies, in which American cinema is invariably the significant (bad) Other, around which national and “art/auteur” cinemas are defined.’7

And so we’ve arrived at the point where Hollywood is not only ‘bad’ it is now also ‘Other’. 6
This certainly alters the Hollywoodcentric paradigm. But it doesn’t get rid of the centre-periphery model, nor the binaries that support it.

The solution to this critical impasse involves a paradigm shift, embracing Sconce’s observation that

whereas aesthete interest in style and excess always returns the viewer to the frame, paracinematic attention to excess seeks to push the viewer beyond the formal boundaries of the text…⁸

This new way of looking needs to be extended beyond paracinema: intercinematic relationships between Hollywood and non-Hollywood need to be reimagined and not so much re-framed as un-framed.

Typically, cinemas are imagined to possess rigid and fixed borders. These borders are commonly perceived to be impermeable. They supposedly keep Hollywood conservative and immune from the ideas, images and sounds and the rest of paracinema’s cultural phenomena. Similarly, the borders around paracinema are erected to protect its essential ‘otherness’ and thus keep Hollywood out. Hollywood is perceived to be monolithic, homogenous and homogenising.

If, however, we adopt Arjun Appadurai’s notion of disjunctive cultural global flows as a critical framework we can no longer ignore - or fail to notice - a fluid screenscape in which borders and cultural boundaries are impermeable.⁹

This framework shows how cultural phenomena - ideas, technologies, people, finances and the media - flow around the globe with ever increasing speed and intensity. These flows are disjunctive because they start, stop, speed up, slow down, collide, unite or by-pass each other chaotically and often unpredictably.

When applied to cinema, this challenges how Hollywood is typically imagined. It reveals a screenscape characterised by globalising processes that are far more dynamic, unruly and creative than popularly imagined. By looking for and finding the traces of cultural phenomena within the film frame one can trace the paths they travel to and from their points of origin and destination outside the film frame. From the creative tensions caused by these
asymmetrical and multidirectional flows as they impact upon each other - with no two flows travelling or intersecting at the same time or in the same place with the same speed or intensity - a previously unobserved screenscape emerges in which it is possible to see globalising processes as hybridising processes.

To sum up, if we choose to look at ‘the non-diegetic aspects of the image’ as Sconce neatly phrased it, we can see that the hybridisations Joan Hawkins discusses in her thoughtful essay in Sleaze Artists are no respecter of cultural borders.

I propose we choose to look.

For this is a screenscape in which a Hollywoodcentric centre-periphery model is no longer tenable. It does not deny Hollywood’s undoubted hegemony but it allows us to re-imagine Hollywood. From this perspective, Hollywood is no longer the monolithic homogenous cinema of which all other cinemas live in fear and from which they are in need of protection.

The notion of polarised ‘otherness’ hides the moments of transfer and crossover, and the processes of mutual incorporation. It misrepresents the relationship between paracinema and Hollywood and by failing to note, as David E. James argues in respect of avant garde cinema, that Hollywood ‘has been a constant presence, one that enticed as often as it repelled its would-be other and inspired as often as it inhibited it’. Similarly, it fails to map the ideas, images, filmmakers and other cultural material flowing in the other direction, from the avant-garde to Hollywood.

This isn’t going to make paracinema any more or less ‘bad’ but it does see more clearly that intercinematic relationships work in infinitely more complex and varied ways than simply in negative reaction to each other.

And to show you what I mean, I’ll end with a short clip of female masturbation fantasy which any self-respecting (‘good’?) academic at a bad cinema conference should do.

The following clip from a 1915 film may not be the first filmic female masturbation fantasy but it’s surely surprising in one of the founding texts of ‘good’ cinema.

➔ Birth of a Nation (D.W. Griffith, 1915)
3 Sconce, 1995: 392.
4 Sconce, 1995: 381.
6 “If World War I enabled American cinema to ruin French cinema, World War II, together with the advent of television, enabled it to finance, that is to say ruin, all the cinemas of Europe.” (Godard, Histoire(s) du cinéma. 1989-1998.) See Michael Wood, ‘After the Movies’, LRB, 4 Dec 2008.
10 Sconce, 1995: 387